**Vegetarianism and the Environment**

**Vegetarianism and the Environment: The Need for Sustainable Diets**

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Along with the current trend of eating “organic” and “local” foods, one of the hot topics that has sparked debate among scholars and bloggers alike is the question of whether or not being a vegetarian affects the environment. Those who believe that vegetarianism has a positive effect on the environment argue that the massive production of animal products for human consumption can lead to land degradation, water and air pollution, and even a change in climate. Academic research indicates that these detrimental effects accrue as we continue producing meat products. However, a review of comments from both vegetarian and meat-eating Internet bloggers shows that the human desire for choice – especially choices about the vital need for food – is the most important figure in this debate. To account for those who choose to eat meat despite the benefits of vegetarianism for the environment, the question then remains: how can we make meat-eating more sustainable?

**Vegetarianism and the Environment: A Scholarly Look**

In 2000, the World Health Organization reported that one in every three people suffered from malnutrition as a result of rapid population growth and diminished land, water, and energy resources.1  Therefore, in response to the public’s increasing concerns about our impact upon the earth’s welfare, scientists have begun to research ways in which we can positively influence our environment. Though we often think of vegetarianism as a lifestyle chosen as a result of dietary limitations or desires to protect the health and improve treatment of animals, many people are beginning to ask, “Does vegetarianism actually benefit the environment as well?”

Let’s look at the scientific literature: In a 2009 Californian study comparing the environmental effects of vegetarian versus non-vegetarian diets, the researchers sought to answer this question and elaborate upon it by asking, “Does animal consumption create a heavier footprint than a vegetarian diet?” and “If so, what are some of the major environmental effects of an animal-based diet, and how might these be measured?”  They found that a non-vegetarian diet consumed 2.9 times more water,1 2.5 times more primary energy, 13 times more fertilizer, and 1.4 times more pesticide than a vegetarian diet.2 These statistics suggest that vegetarian diets are, in fact, less taxing on the environment. These researchers support the notion that increased environmental degradation is a byproduct of increased agricultural output. Modern agriculture has prioritized optimum crop yields and animal farming to the detriment of the environment via increased energy output, use of natural resources, and generation of waste. An Italian study presented in the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition that specifically evaluated the environmental impact of omnivorous and vegetarian/vegan diets based on both non-organic and organic products as six separate dietary patterns in addition to a “normal” or average Italian diet produced similar results.3  Again, the researchers concluded that meat-based diets strain the environment the most and found that water consumption, in particular, plays the most significant role by accounting for 41-46% of the overall impact.3

This data raises another question, however: whether vegetarian diets are sufficiently sustainable or are simply more sustainable than animal-based diets – that is, are current vegetarian diets “enough”? The majority of recent studies have focused on the comparison of non-vegetarian and vegetarian diets, but have yet to offer concrete conclusions on the practicality of mass implementation environmentally friendly diets. The European Journal of Clinical Nutrition study points to the importance of considering two factors, however: “(1) people generally and openly display extreme reluctance to change their eating habits1; (2) a change in the eating habits and in the dietary trends of developing countries may play an important role in the arrest and reversal of some major current environmental trends.”3 If future studies can integrate these suggestions, then perhaps we will come closer to an effective solution to our increasing environmental concerns.

**What the Bloggers are saying**

Whether you do a google search for “vegetarian and environment debate” or “anti-vegetarianism,” the popular consensus among bloggers on the Internet seems to be that being a vegetarian does have positive effects on the environment. The question for many, it appears, is not “does being a vegetarian help the environment?” but “how realistic is it to be vegetarian?” and “what is my personal choice to become a vegetarian?” These queries produce more nuanced responses.

If you ask google.com “how does being vegetarian help the environment”, the answers from multiple websites resound with some of the following explanations: meat-eating destroys natural habitats, the meat-industry produces greenhouse gases, and raising animals for slaughter leads to an inefficient use of agricultural land. One website, called “chooseveg.com,” cites a Dr. David Brubaker of Johns Hopkins University to sum up these consequences of meat consumption: “It pollutes our environment while consuming huge amounts of water, grain, petroleum, pesticides and drugs. The results are disastrous.”  Even websites that are yielded from a search into “anti-vegetarianism” confirm that maintaining a vegetarian diet is healthy for both the individual and the environment.  Anti-vegetarians, such as those who post on the website for the “Anti-Vegetarian Society of Meat-Eaters,” don’t implicate the environment in their arguments that endorse meat eating. Instead, they focus on the issue of personal liberty to choose to eat meat: “We continue to see activist and political efforts aimed at being the “Kitchen Police,” telling people what they can and cannot eat.”5  It appears that the voice of opposition is not against vegetarianism, but rather the challenge to the personal choice of eating meat.

But anti-vegetarianists aren’t the only people who call upon the rhetoric of “choice” with regards to eating or not eating meat: many vegetarians weigh in on the debate by addressing environmental concerns while specifying that these were not their primary reason for “going vegetarian.” One vegetarian blogger reflecting on his/her own reasons for becoming a vegetarian writes, “I’m a vegetarian for various reasons: the environmental reason would probably be enough for me…the most important reason…is totally different however. Basically I’m a vegetarian for spiritual reasons.”6  Another vegetarian blogger explains that his/her choice to eat a vegetarian diet is due to the animal cruelty performed by the commercial meat industry so that cheap meat can be produced and consumed. This vegetarian claims, “There are not too many people that are veggie for environmental reasons alone…If that means I contribute less to environmental damage by that choice, so be it.”7  So while environmental issues may be considered important, the emphasis remains on the fact that a variety of personal reasons result in one’s choice to become a vegetarian.

Finally, both vegetarians and non-vegetarians on the Internet comment on the reality of choosing not to meat. Concerns about the relative healthiness of being a vegetarian to that of eating meat are prominent threads on the Internet. Many bloggers comment on whether or not vegetarians receive enough nutrients from their diet (the answer seems to be “yes”, as long as they make sure to incorporate foods that are sources of particular nutrients that meat-eaters generally access through meat). As one Internet writer notes, however, “the reality is we have to make [the planet] more sustainable for people who don’t want to be vegetarians.”  He admits that while avoiding meat is highly beneficial to the environment, it is important to recognize that many people will refuse to become vegetarians and that there are ways to make meat eating more sustainable, such as eating less meat and discriminating against certain types of meat – beef in particular. This nuanced argument, which was also offered by academic researchers, offers a practical response to the vegetarian debate.

Thus, scholars and bloggers appear to agree: human vegetarianism is a healthy option for the environment. “Choice” and “reality” seem to be fundamental figures in the debate about vegetarianism and its impact on the environment.  According to both the academic and the Internet communities, being a vegetarian does help the environment. But the question remains: how can the choice of human diets – both vegetarian and meat-based – be made more sustainable?